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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: CHIPPING AWAY AT AOUN'S POPULARITY

REF: A. BEIRUT 285
[1](#)B. BEIRUT 169
[1](#)C. 08 BEIRUT 1748
[1](#)D. 08 BEIRUT 1679
[1](#)E. 08 BEIRUT 0057

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) In January 2008, we analyzed Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun's popularity among his Lebanese Christian supporters (ref E), which was strong despite his political alliance with the terrorist Shia organization Hizballah. One year-plus later, and 11 weeks before the June 7 parliamentary elections, Aoun continues to assert his dominance as leader of Lebanon's Christians.

[1](#)2. (C) In the meantime, however, several developments may have chipped away at Aoun's popularity with his Christian base. His former ally, independent MP Michel Murr, has moved away from him and formed an electoral alliance with March 14. Michel Sleiman, who now holds the presidency that Aoun coveted in January 2008, has emerged as a symbolic leader of the Christians. A group of independent Christian candidates is preparing itself for the election. Aoun's sharp criticism that this independent bloc is mostly a March 14-allied group targeting him (which is true), his verbal attacks against the Maronite Patriarch and his 2008 trips to Tehran and Damascus also appear to have eroded his support among some Christians. However, there are no reliable, publicly available polls to test that theory. Most observers agree that Aoun's core supporters remain steadfastly attached, but just how big that core is, and what will be the impact of the "independent" candidates, are subjects of debate. End summary.

AOUN: A WANING PHENOMENON?

[1](#)3. (C) Aoun and his supporters claim to have the backing of 70% of Lebanon's Christians. Many believe that while that may have been true in the last national election in 2005, it is an exaggeration today. They point to the 2007 by-election in the heavily Christian Metn district, which Aoun's candidate won but only by a very slim margin, as a sign his popularity has dropped. The thinking is that the emerging

independent Christian candidates for the June 7 election will pry away former Aoun voters who cannot bring themselves to support the two March 14 Christian parties, Samir Geagea's Lebanese Forces and Amine Gemayel's Kataeb party. Independent Christian candidates could tip the balance in the election. Aoun, meanwhile, continues to play on his self-perceived role as victim to attract sympathetic voters, lashing out at the Patriarch, the independent candidates and those who criticize him.

¶4. (C) Some disenchanted Aoun supporters accuse him of no longer representing the same values he did when he returned to Lebanon from Paris in 2005, citing his recent overtures to Syria and Iran. However, Aoun's attacks against corruption (associated with the Hariri family in the minds of many Lebanese Christians) and calls for change still resonate with loyal voters. Polling data, notoriously self-serving in Lebanon, suggest Aoun remains highly popular. March 14 contacts, predictably, claim his popularity is on the wane.

MURR DEFECTION:
THE NAIL IN THE COFFIN?

¶5. (C) Independent Greek Orthodox parliamentary Michel Murr, a longtime power broker of Lebanese politics who sided with Aoun in the 2007 by-election in Metn to ensure the FPM's victory over the Kataeb candidate, dealt Aoun a harsh blow in May 2008 by breaking with his former ally. Murr, who said he quit the alliance because "FPM made no achievements over the past four years" has since made it his personal mission to

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defeat Aoun in the Metn district in the June 7 parliamentary elections. His son, Defense Minister Elias Murr, told us recently that Michel Murr is focused on one idea -- "if Aoun wins in Metn, then Hizballah will have taken over Lebanon" (Ref A).

¶6. (C) Recently, Murr declared an alliance in the Metn district with March 14 stalwart Nassib Lahoud as Kataeb candidates. Aoun responded to Murr's alliance with vehement attacks against Lahoud.

¶7. (C) Persons allied with Aoun in the last election, including Michel Murr, currently hold all eight of the Metn seats. Murr is certain to win his seat, and analysts predict that former President Amine Gemayel's son, Sami Gemayel, will win running on Murr's list (Ref B). Depending on where the Armenian Tashnaq throws its allegiance (and Murr, who rallied Tashnaq to side against March 14 in the 2007 by-election, plays a key role here), Murr's list has the potential to threaten Aoun in Metn. A Murr victory will certainly prevent an Aoun sweep in Metn.

INDEPENDENT CANDIDATES:
THE THORN IN AOUN'S SIDE

¶8. (C) The threat of an independent Christian bloc (Ref D) has loomed for months. While it is unclear who will run in which districts (specifically Keserwan, Jbeil, Baabda, and Zahle), most observers predict Aoun is more likely than March 14 Christian candidates to lose Christian votes to the independent candidates. If President Sleiman throws his weight behind the independents (something he still insists he will not do before the elections), Aoun will face an even greater challenge. Aoun, with his own presidential aspirations, views Sleiman as a threat, but will find it difficult to attack the former army chief and popular president.

¶9. (C) Aoun is focusing his attacks on the independents themselves. On January 12, Aoun publicly likened neutral politicians to water, saying they are "tasteless, colorless, and odorless." He questioned their neutrality on March 1,

saying, "The ruling class is trying to advertise a group of decaying candidates under different titles with the aim of breaking up Christians." Some contacts perceive that Aoun's popularity suffered because of his criticisms, with Christian supporters believing Aoun was unjustifiably severe. Conversely, other political observers (begrudgingly) remark that Aoun is precisely right, saying, "There is no such thing as neutrality in Lebanon."

¶10. (C) Even without forming his own parliamentary bloc, Sleiman has emerged as a symbol of pride for Lebanese Christians, a role Aoun had to himself previously. Sleiman, who previously served as Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) commander, is supported by Christians in the LAF, a group that stood by Aoun, himself a former LAF commander. Sleiman, by reinvigorating the role of the presidency, has stepped fully into the role of Christian leader.

¶11. (C) March 14 contacts have suggested that Aoun would use a parliamentary victory to challenge the legitimacy of Sleiman's election, which occurred without the required constitutional amendment needed to elect high-ranking government officials who have been in office within two years prior to the election. DefMin Elias Murr said Sleiman himself believes that a success for Aoun's bloc would result in a reduction of the president's role. He quoted Sleiman as saying, "If Aoun wins, I may as well pack my bags for the rest of my term."

TRIPS TO DAMASCUS, TEHRAN --
WHO LEADS THE CHRISTIANS?

¶12. (C) Although March 14 members heavily criticized Aoun's October 2008 trip to Tehran and December 2008 trip to

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Damascus, Aoun's traditional support base did not seem to diminish because Aoun touted it as gaining regional support as the Christian leader in Lebanon. We are told that less committed supporters, however, felt betrayed by Aoun's overtures, accusing the once archly anti-Syrian Aoun of having changed his spots. Moreover, most concluded that his trip to Damascus was unsuccessful because he walked away empty-handed. In particular, he made no progress on the issue of Lebanese detainees in Syria, a matter which he frequently proclaims his support for resolving. Furthermore, according to Elias Murr, Aoun's trip to Damascus enraged Sleiman (Ref C), because of the royal treatment Aoun received.

JIBES AT THE PATRIARCH

¶13. (C) Responding to Patriarch Sfeir's outspoken criticism of him, Aoun, along with ally Marada party leader Suleiman Franjeh, has publicly criticized the Patriarch in the past year, saying sternly on February 10 that the Patriarch "does not speak on behalf of all of the Christians." In the same press conference, Aoun said the Patriarch is "with the March 14 alliance and is not a centrist. This means he is against (us)."

¶14. (C) Aoun's quibbles with the Patriarch have been long-standing and there is no sign his popularity with Christians has suffered as a result of this verbal tiff. However, the Patriarch remains influential and his statements, such as declaring that it would be a "historical mistake" if the March 8 coalition won a majority in parliament, can impact independent-minded Christian voters.

COMMENT

¶15. (C) Political observers posit that Aoun lost all of the supporters he was going to lose when he signed the Memorandum of Understanding with Hizballah in 2006. However, the rise

of independent candidates offers a viable alternative to less-committed Aoun supporters, and could cost Aoun support in June. Many Lebanese Christians support Aoun out of distaste for March 14 Christian leaders Gemayel and Geagea (Ref E). Thus, the emergence of independent candidates that might allow Christians to avoid Aoun without voting for either of them must cause the General great concern. End comment.
SISON